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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a systematic approach to composition instruction and provides evidence of that system's successful implementation. The approach is based on Benjamin S. Bloom's Taxonomy and has five stages: presenting the student with reasons for learning the material, listing immediate and long-range instructional objectives, preassessing students' abilities to see if they have already achieved the objectives, prescribing and performing a variety of learning activities (including self-quizzes, class discussions, presentations, and student/teacher conferences), and making periodic evaluations to see if students have reached their goals. The five stages are used for each writing assignment or each unit of study within the composition course. Examples of unit outlines, self-quizzes, and questions from revision data sheets illustrate the ways the five stages can be applied to units of study in composition. The responses from pre-course and post-course student evaluations indicate that this systematic approach facilitates the learning of composition skills and that students completing the course had a more positive attitude toward literary composition.

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A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Too often when English faculty members hear discussions concerning a systems approach to English Composition, the use of instructional objectives and the application of Bloom's Taxonomy to the teaching of writing, they experience visions of declining standards, blind rejection of the best in traditional education methodology, stifled creativity and dehumanized students. However, these frightening apparitions are figments of overactive imaginations. A systematic approach to instruction is neither a repudiation of more traditional methodologies nor a synonym for a particular type of instructional methodology (e.g., lecture, lab, individualized instruction). "Systems" should not raise the spectre of lowered standards, for one of its aims is to enhance the quality of instruction. The present writer defines a systematic approach to instruction as one of many ways of humanizing education. Such an approach requires the instructor to view teaching as causing learning, to recognize that causing learning is often a problem, and to seek carefully planned solutions to learning problems. Based on these concepts, the observations below will delineate a model for a systematic approach to English Composition.

The subsequent paragraphs will review (1) the fundamental assumptions on which the model is based, (2) how these principles can and are being applied to certain English Composition courses taught at Harrisburg Area Community College (PA), and (3) the evaluation data suggesting the effectiveness of the approach.

The writer became interested about five years ago in experimenting with a systems approach using instructional objectives, and with learning packets as they might relate to English Composition. The term experimental is used carefully here. The basic assumptions undergirding the model were viewed strictly as assumptions, not educational truths. Periodic evaluation would be used to modify or reject them as data indicated was necessary. The writer neither wished to promote the systems approach as the only way to teach, nor did he ignore the fact that much quality teaching utilizes more traditional modes of instruction. The teaching/learning interaction is viewed here as an unusually complex one beset by a multitude of variables. There are no simple answers to the problems besetting the educational endeavor.

Building on the work of Benjamin S. Bloom and others, the model assumes five components in the teaching/learning endeavor as major factors in influencing the degree of learning achieved by the student. The factors include: (1) the time allowed for the learning of a task, (2) the student's perseverance in that learning, (3) the student's aptitude defined as the amount of time required by a learner to attain mastery of a learning task, (4) the quality of instruction, and (5) the ability to understand instruction.¹ Of course, the "time allowed" factor above can pose some problems for instructors who teach in a traditionally oriented and structured institution. While they may grant the validity of the assertion made by many educators today, that most students can achieve mastery if they are allowed and do spend the necessary amount of time on a learning task, most instructors may not be able to stretch the time parameters set by the college beyond a certain measure. For instructors working in

traditionally oriented educational systems, and faced with the usual expenditure of significant amounts of time on non-instructional matters, allowing an open-ended time scheme for instruction may neither be permissible nor feasible. Yet, the author has found that, while the institution usually controls the time factor, the limitations it sets can be modified somewhat when necessary. The perseverance factor is worth noting, for it represents the time a student is willing to spend in learning, a recognition that the educational endeavor is two-sided: the learner must make an effort as well as the instructor. The final two factors -- quality of instruction and ability to understand instruction -- are elements over which the instructor has explicit control. The quality of instruction, as used here, means the degree to which the presentation of instruction, its explanation, and the ordering of learning tasks approach the optimum for a given learner. Ability to understand instruction means the ability of learners to understand the nature of the task they are to learn and the procedure they are to follow in its learning. Since the first three factors -- time allowed, perseverance, and aptitude -- are only partially amenable to a faculty member's influence, the study does not concentrate at length on them. Primary attention has been given to the last 2 factors -- quality of instruction and ability to understand instruction -- in the belief that if these are optimized, and the traditional system is benignly tampered with to some extent by the individual instructor, a reasonable application of Bloom's components can be achieved.

The instructional model is built around a five step procedure directed at answering certain fundamental questions the student brings to

any learning task (see Figure 1).²

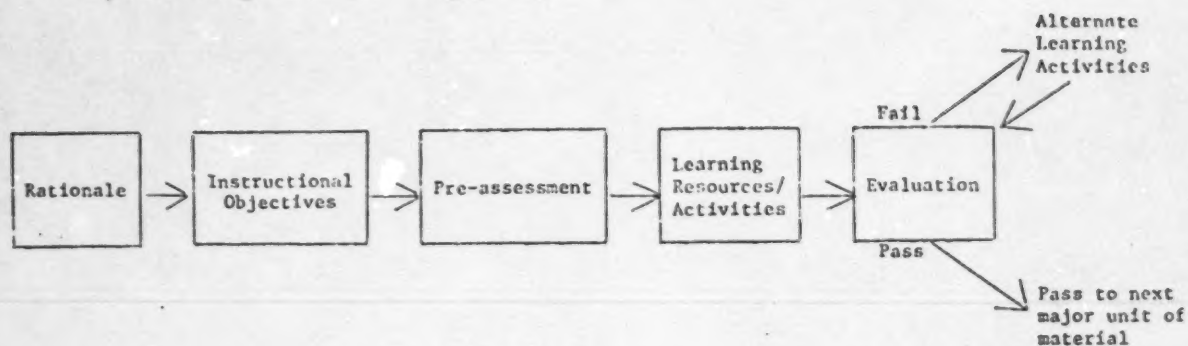


Figure 1
Essential Elements of Model

First, a rationale is presented to the learner, aimed at answering the student's legitimate question: "Why should I learn this material?"

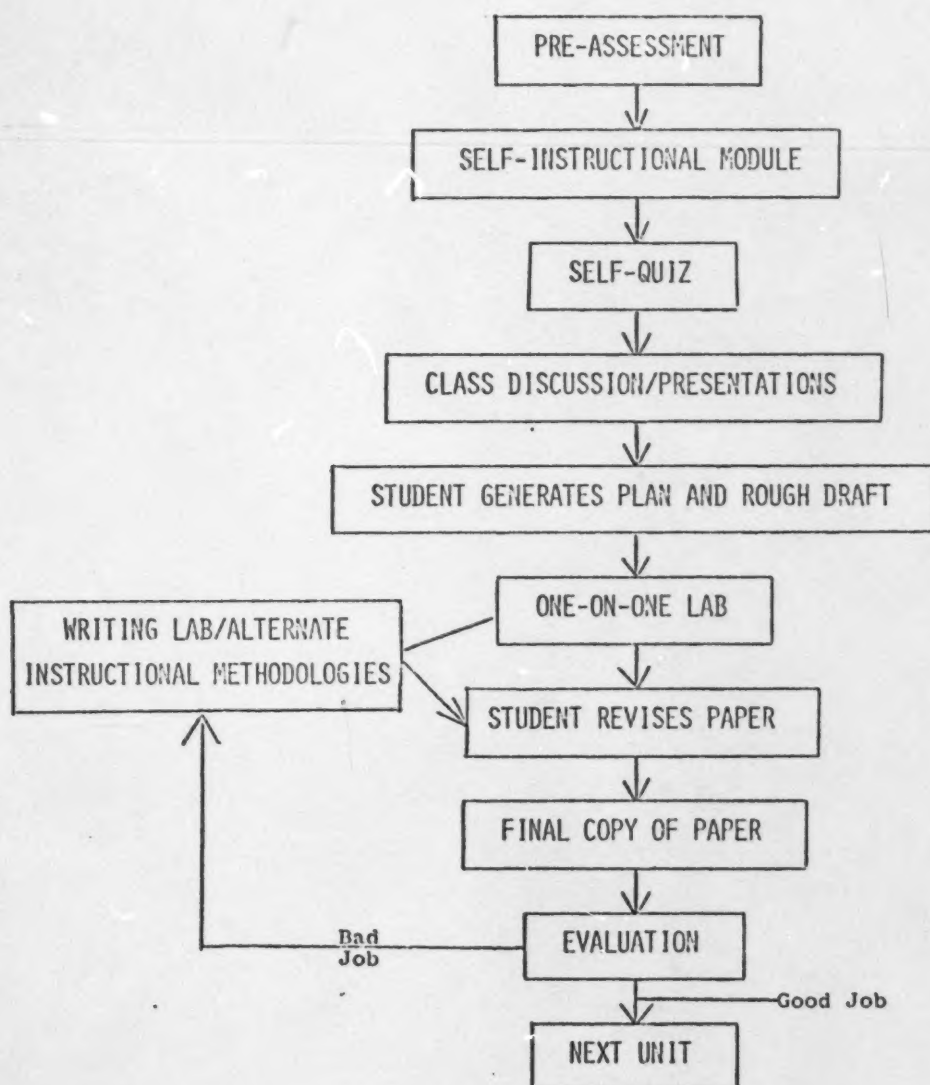
The system described below utilizes a combination of instructor and student generated reasons, most of which are produced and/or clarified during short class discussions when particular writing assignments are introduced. The second step in the procedure is the introduction of a set of instructional objectives aimed at answering the student's next major question about the learning task: "If I should learn this material, what exactly must I learn?" The objectives are of two types. The first is a set of terminal goals which state what final skills the student must master in order to pass the course. The other set are intermediate objectives which detail what the student must master step-by-step to accomplish the terminal goals. The third step of the procedure is pre-assessment designed to answer the student's third significant question: "Do I already have the abilities outlined in the objectives?" Pre-assessment in English Composition courses may, of course, take many forms - diagnostic themes, standardized tests, or the instructor's own instruments for measuring the competencies students possess. The fourth step

in the procedure, the prescription of learning resources and activities, helps the student to answer the question, "If I don't have the abilities set forth in the objectives, how may I attain them?" Once the student has worked through the learning resources and activities, he reaches the final step, that of evaluation. Evaluation simply proposes to answer the question, "After the work I've done, do I now have the skills I'm seeking?" If the evaluation indicates that the unit of material has been mastered, then the student passes on to the next major unit of material and repeats his movement through the procedure again. However, if the evaluation indicates a lack of mastery, the student is directed instead to alternate learning activities which, by presenting the material in a different fashion, may foster the necessary achievement. After the student has worked through the prescribed alternate resources, he again undergoes evaluation.

The instructional model itself, while incorporating the five step procedure just outlined in Figure 1, utilizes a variety of instructional activities in the teaching of writing skills(see Figure 2).

Figure 2

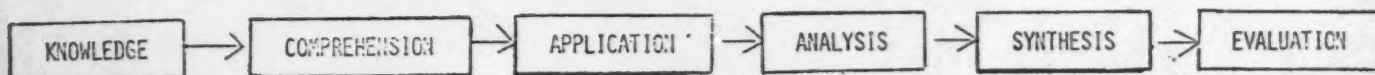
An Instructional Model for English Composition



This variety is necessary because the skill being taught is a complex one and the multitude of variables affecting any communication of information (and especially classroom communication) are bound to make any single approach significantly less than effective. The model requires that course material be divided into instructional units of some sort. In this case, each unit is designed around a particular writing assignment the student must learn to execute (the comparison paper, the process essay, the argument, etc.), each assignment requiring about two weeks of instructional time to introduce, explain, and bring to fruition.

In the selection and/or development of learning resources and activities for his Composition classes, the author paid special attention to Bloom's Taxonomy (see Figure 3).³

Figure 3
LEVELS OF BLOOM'S TAXONOMY



The Taxonomy itself is merely a classification of basic cognitive abilities in order of complexity, from the lowest levels of recall and recognition of basic facts (knowledge) to the highest level involving value judgments and decision-making for given purposes (evaluation). The Taxonomy should be viewed simply as a useful tool which can aid instructors in three ways. First, it can help them identify abilities that the students must master. Second, it enables them to order the teaching/learning tasks in a logical sequence, each higher and more difficult task resting on the mastery of lower level abilities. Third, it assists in communicating to students

what they should achieve in mastering a particular unit of course material.

As already noted above, each unit of material begins with a rationale and some form of pre-assessment, and ends with an evaluation of the student's achievements or lack of them (see Figure 1 above). However, between those points, a number of activities intervene and are extremely important to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the model. For instance, if the pre-assessment indicates that learners do need some instruction, they are given instructional modules, one of the key teaching tools of the model, detailing the work to be accomplished in a given unit. The purpose of the module is to enable students to work on their own through the material they must master, why they must master it, and how they can go about doing so (more will be said on the nature of the module later). Once students have worked through the self-instructional module, they are presented with a self-quiz--a formative evaluation, a non-graded, non-punitive test--so that they may determine whether they have the requisite knowledge to execute the writing assignment before them. They then bring the self-quiz and module to a general class discussion used by the instructor to correct misunderstandings or lack of understanding concerning some of the material studied. This session also enables the instructor to go into more depth about the assignment (moving from the essential background the class has gained), and to gauge various students' abilities to analyze and apply their knowledge to the writing task before them. The next step in the model is for students to produce a plan and a rough draft of the assigned essay. At this point, students have hopefully gained enough knowledge to move to the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy,

synthesis and evaluation. They are being asked to exercise their creativity, to create a new whole out of the parts available, to solve a problem using creative, original thinking -- a writing problem in this instance. Furthermore, they are being asked to evaluate the quality and value of the material they are producing and to use a definite set of criteria, gained through their study of the module, in making that judgment.

With the plan and rough draft finished, the student again comes to class, this time for a one-on-one conference with the instructor during what is termed a "laboratory" period. During the period, students begin to review their rough drafts while the instructor moves from one student to another, holding a two to four minute conference with each. The one-on-one conference permits a quick speed reading of each paper, a diagnosis of major errors it contains, and a discussion with the individual about the nature of, and solutions to, the writing problems present. The one-on-one lab has proved an extremely valuable aspect of the model for it allows a personal mentor-like interaction between writer and teacher, it aids in building significant rapport with individual students, and it insures full communication of material. Concerning this last point, it serves as a further check on whether or not students have truly understood the material, and it represents a second formative evaluation -- a second non-threatening, non-punitive evaluation on their progress in attaining the writing skill they seek. If it is plain to the instructor that the paper seen in the lab will not meet the objectives of the unit, the student is then cycled into a series of alternate instructional activities. These are for students having significant problems in writing. If the problems discovered in the lab are relatively minor, the individual continues the revision process without further assistance.

From this point, the writing process moves rapidly towards evaluation. Students prepare final copies of their papers and hand them in for a summative evaluation, i.e., an evaluation for a grade, a grade that will contribute to their overall grade for the course. If a paper meets the objectives detailed in the instructional module, its writer progresses to the next unit of material and the instructional cycle of the model begins again. However, if a paper fails to meet the objectives, some attempt is made to follow up on the student's problems, usually with additional work in the college's Writing Center, with the utilization of out-of-class tutoring, and with other alternative instructional activities. In a relatively traditional academic system, the pressure of semester deadlines and calendar requirements prevent large scale recycling of students through this route. Yet, again it should be stressed that the system can be bent to some extent to make the instructional process more productive and effective to the necessities of the learning situation.

As noted already, the instructional module is a key element in the instructional system described above. Each module is structured similarly.⁴ Each begins with a simple list of topics students will become familiar with as they work their way through the packet. Such a list for a module on writing a definition essay might appear as follows:

A definition of the word "definition"
The one sentence formal definition
Rules of logic governing formal definitions
The extended definition

This list is succeeded by a rationale stating why the student should master the material, and a set of goals for the unit, defining in greater detail what the student should be able to do after completing the unit. A typical rationale for the definition packet might read as follows:

Rationale:

A knowledge of how to write a clear definition is more useful than is often realized. We use thousands of words for which we have specialized or personalized definitions, definitions that will not be found in the dictionary. When we are called upon to define terms, a knowledge of how to define them concisely and clearly can make the difference between a reader's understanding or continued ignorance. Further, knowing how to write a one-sentence formal definition can be of yeoman's service when we are faced with the task of giving correct definitions in examinations, in class papers, or in business correspondence.

With the rationale clearly stated, the instructor must then move to a summary of the goals of the unit -- a general set of statements delineating what the purposes of the module are, such as:

Goals of the Unit:

- 1) To become acquainted with the nature of definition writing, both in the formal and the extended sense.
- 2) To be able to identify the various rules of logic governing correct formal definition.
- 3) To become familiar with the various methods of developing a one-sentence formal definition into an extended essay.
- 4) To become acquainted with the difference in quality between well written definition essays and those that are not, given essays of both kinds.
- 5) To be able to write an effective/efficient definition essay (and defend it against criticisms) based on the foregoing knowledge.

Following the goals is the heart of the unit -- a detailed set of objectives, learning activities, and special instructions to be studied in mastering the material of the module. The terminal objective of the unit (see Figure 4 below), states the skills students should possess after completing their work. Under the terminal objective are three lists (see Figure 4), the one on the left setting forth specific instructional objectives students must master in order to attain the terminal objectives.

Figure 4 - A partial objectives page of
a Definition Module

TERMINAL OBJECTIVE: Be able to write a good definition essay meeting the objectives below and those attached to the end of this unit.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	LEARNING RESOURCES/ACTIVITIES	SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS
1. Be able to define orally or in writing the following terms: definition, formal definition, extended definition, circular definition, term classification, term differentiation, and negation.	1. Read Unit 11, pp. 193-198 in <u>Assignments in Exposition</u> and attend class on subject.	
2. Be able to identify elements which must appear in a formal definition (or one sentence definition) and name the six logical rules to which it must adhere.	2. Read Unit 11, pp. 193-198 in <u>Assignments in Exposition</u> and attend class discussion on the subject.	2. Complete self-quiz attached to this module and check your answers against those clarified by class discussion.
6. Be able to differentiate between successful, well written and unsuccessful, poorly written definition essays.	6. Study the essays attached to this module and attend the class discussion during which these examples are reviewed.	6. Bring essay exercise to class and be prepared to discuss your perceptions.
7. Be able to write a good definition essay meeting the objectives attached to the end of this module.	7. Use the worksheet attached to this module to plan your paragraph. Then write a rough draft of the work. Bring your rough draft to the class laboratory period for consultation with your instructor (until your work has been seen in lab, it may not be handed in).	7. After you have received your instructor's evaluation, you may wish to consult with him again on points you do not understand or criticisms you feel are in error. If your work fails to meet the goals on the objective checklist at the rear of this module, you should discuss the problem with your instructor.

The center column contains instructions to be followed. The latter aids students in assessing whether they are attaining the necessary skills they seek and may take many forms, such as a set of self-quiz questions, a one-on-one conference, class discussion, etc.⁶ For instance, a typical set of self-quiz questions for a definition module might look like the following:

1. Define the following terms in your own words:
 - a) Definition
 - b) Formal definition
 - c) Extended definition
 - d) Classification
 - e) Differentiation
2. List the six rules of logic which govern the statement of a clear one sentence formal definition.
3. List at least six methods by which a formal definition may be developed or extended into an essay.

Finally, as part of a continuing effort to optimize the quality of instruction in the course and to improve on the usefulness of the module as an educational instrument, an attempt is made to tap student opinion concerning how well they believe the packet furthered their learning in writing essays. Each unit of material carries a revision data sheet similar to the one below, and the results are tabulated and utilized to increase the reliability of the module.

Sample Revision Data Sheet Questions

After completing Module 1, please answer the questions below. Your answers will help your instructor "debug" those aspects of the module that "bugged" you. Please submit the sheet at the end of our discussion of the module.

1. Were the goals and rationale on the first page of the unit clear to you? Yes _____. No _____. If no, explain _____
2. Do you feel now, after completing the unit that you are better equipped to write effective, efficient paragraphs? Yes _____. No _____. If no, explain _____

3. Of the five major objectives of this unit, is there one or more which you feel you have not mastered? If so, check them: #1____. #2____. #3____. #4____. #5____.

4. Did the self-test packet help you to direct your reading and test your understanding of the important ideas to be gained from the module? Yes____. No____.

If revision data sheets are not used and if some attempt at an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the course is not made, a systematic approach to instruction is little more than a farce. The aim of such an effort is not only to present instruction in a systematic fashion, but also to evaluate the educational endeavor systematically with the aim of constantly improving it.

Thus, the author has not only collected data pertinent to the revision of the various modules used in the course, but also has attempted a more extensive evaluation of the entire course -- its activities and the instruction. The data in this case are necessarily perceptual and of course suffer from the normal limitations on the validity and reliability of perceptual data. Yet, care was taken to avoid a Hawthorne effect in collecting the results below.

While the data should be approached with caution, the results still appear to indicate an extremely positive response to English Composition based on the model just described. Information was sought concerning (1) whether students felt they had significantly improved their writing ability by working through the course, (2) how they rated the effectiveness of the instructional model upon which the course was based, and (3) how they rated the effectiveness of the various components on the model. Of some 187 individuals responding to the post-course evaluation, 154 (82%) felt they had significantly improved their writing during the

semester, 24 (14%) were not sure, and 7 (4%) asserted they definitely had not experienced noticeable improvement. When asked to rate their level of learning in English Composition, 116 (62%) described it as more than average to very high. Of the rest, 65 (34%) suggested their level was average, and only 6 (4%) indicated it as less than average or very small.

Ratings of the model and its various components suggest it is at least one source of the significant increase in skills the respondents indicated. For instance, when students were asked whether or not the system of self-instructional modules, labs and discussion sessions gave them enough interaction with the instructor to understand the assignments of the course, an astounding 176 (93%) indicated they had. Only 12 (7%) suggested the opposite. Further responses suggest that each of the model's instructional activities, aimed at improving communication, contributed significantly to this overall rating. For instance, 134 (71%) liked the self-instructional module approach, whereas 47 (25%) were unsure, and 6 (4%) noted a definite dislike for it. The discussion sessions also appear to be important. Sixty-seven respondents (36%) felt they had gained a great deal from class discussion, and another 104 (55%) indicated they had gained "a fair amount." Only 16 (9%) voiced the opinion that the discussion sessions were of little value. The class writing labs received similar strong support. Sixty-eight students (36%) noted that they had benefited "a great deal" and an additional 90 (48%) believed they had gained "a fair amount" from the one-on-one conference. However, for 29 (16%), the lab seems to have been of little assistance. Overall, students seemed especially pleased with the way the course was structured

and rated it so. One hundred and sixty-five students (89%) gave it a comprehensive rating of "good" to "excellent" and the remaining 11% (20) termed it "okay." No one felt compelled to give it a "poor" rating.

Besides the cognitive evaluation items reported above, the author made some attempt at an affective evaluation of student attitudes toward English in general and their experiences in the course in particular. He was interested not only in whether they improved their writing skills during the semester, but also in whether or not their enjoyment and/or value judgments concerning English had improved. Thus, on the first day of the semester, students were asked to take a short pre-course evaluation asking for information on how they then felt about English. On the final day of class, they were again asked for their opinions on a post-course evaluation containing, among others, a number of the same affectively oriented questions they had answered on the pre-course instrument. The results are detailed in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Evaluation of Changes in Student Attitudes Towards English Composition

Item	Pre-course Response						Post-course Response					
	Yes		Not sure		No		Yes		Not sure		No	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Composition of practical benefit?	180	77	43	19	8	4	171	91	16	85	1	5
Enjoy English?	74	33	75	32	78	34	139	74	30	16	16	10
Wish to avoid English?	60	23	89	38	78	34	7	5	23	12	157	83

Two-hundred and thirty-one students began English Composition in the classes under consideration and 187 completed the course (an 80% completion rate). A careful check was kept on those withdrawing from the class to ascertain the reasons behind such action. They were those usually found at a sizeable community college: medical problems, changes in off-campus job schedules, misplacement in the course, personal problems, etc. However, there was no expressed dislike for the approach used to deliver instruction in the course.

The results of the pre-course/post-course evaluation are significant in two ways. First, in this instance at least, data do not appear to bear out the often heard complaint in English Departments that students see little relevance in taking English Composition. Though the course is required of all students at Harrisburg Area Community College, 180 of those responding to the pre-course evaluation (77%) believed it would be of practical benefit, 43 (19%) were unsure, and a mere 8 (4%) felt it would not. At the end of the semester, 171 (91%) indicated the experience was of practical benefit, 16 (8.5%) were still not sure, and only 1 individual (.5%) claimed it was not.

A second important finding of the evaluation indicated that student feelings and value judgments about English showed a significant shift toward the positive end of the spectrum. When asked if they enjoyed English at the beginning of the course, only 74 (33%) individuals answered, "yes." Seventy-five (33%) were not sure and 78 (34%) clearly indicated they did not enjoy it. However, by the end of the class, 139 (74%) claimed they enjoyed English, 30 (16%) were not sure, and 16 had not. Students were further asked if they would avoid another English

class if they could. During the pre-course evaluation, 60 (28%) clearly indicated they would, 89 (38%) were not sure, and only 78 (34%) said they would definitely not seek to avoid English. By the end of the semester, few appeared to be avoidance oriented. For instance, 157 (83%) of those remaining in the course no longer wished to avoid English, 23 (12%) were not sure, and a mere 7 (5%) were negative about taking another class in the discipline. While other variables (instructor's personality, age of students, etc.) may have contributed somewhat to the extremely positive affective shift reported here, that shift is too great to be attributed to them. Moreover, the results from the cognitive evaluation items reported earlier suggest that the model has some important influence in changing student values. In an era in which students have exhibited significant apathy towards English language and literature studies, a model of instruction which aids in changing some rather negative attitudes toward the discipline may be worth further investigation.

In conclusion, the model described above is not presented as a panacea for the problems that beset instruction in English Composition. Rather, it is viewed as an experimental approach, open to further modification as the demands of different instructional environments require and open to further efforts at validation. However, evaluation data collected to date and summarized above suggest the model is a viable strategy for systematically coping with the complex problems involved in the teaching of writing. The approach appears to be influential in fostering what learners perceive to be a significant increase in their writing skills and in contributing to an important and positive shift in student

values concerning English. Such results suggest that the model may be a valuable tool in meeting the demands and criticisms now being leveled at instruction in English, demands and criticisms that the discipline must meet in the 1980s.

NOTES

¹Benjamin S. Bloom, "Learning for Mastery." UCLA Evaluation Comment, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1968), or B. S. Bloom and others, Handbook of Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning (N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

²Robert J. Kibler and others, Objectives for Instruction and Evaluation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974), pp. 20-28.

³For an indepth discussion of the taxonomy, see Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I, Cognitive Domain, ed. Benjamin S. Bloom (New York: David McKay Company, 1956).

⁴The particular module form described here was developed by Dr. James O. Hammons, Professor of Higher Education, The University of Arkansas, and Sharon Jaggard, Director of Staff Development, The University of Kentucky community college system, and presented in their Writing A SOLO (Student Oriented Learning Outline): A Self-Instructional Module, 1975.

⁵While the examples given in this article are drawn from a rhetorically oriented course in English Composition, it should be noted that the underlying principles upon which each module is based might be applied to instruction in literature, linguistics, creative writing and other educational endeavors that fall under the general rubric of "English."

⁶In stating instructional goals and objectives and in testing student achievement of them, considerable care must be taken to state objectives that are clear, accurate, and capable of definitive measurement. Test items used to evaluate student progress must also be carefully keyed to objectives in order that what students are supposed to learn and what they are tested on are actually one and the same. More extensive discussions on the proper use of instructional objectives in a systematic approach to instruction can be found in the following: James H. Block (ed.) Mastery Learning: Theory and Practice (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Benjamin S. Bloom, "Learning for Mastery." UCLA Evaluation Comment, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May 1968); David E. Barber, A Systems Approach to Community College Education (N.Y.: Overbach, 1972); and Robert J. Kibler and others, Objectives for Instruction and Evaluation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974).